A Brief History of Fido

BY KEVIN M. SAVETZ

In 1984, a San Francisco hacker named Tom Jennings and a Baltimore programmer John Madill developed the first version of "Fido," a piece of software that would pass messages between their BBSes. The team developed the system just for the fun of it—to see if it could be done. Late at night, the Fido software from one board would pack up all the messages destined for the other system, call it up, quickly exchange messages, and log off. On the other side, Fido would unpack and deliver the messages.

The two allowed other system operators to exchange messages using Fido. It quickly became a network of Fido software users—hence, "FidoNet." By August of 1984, there were about 30 Fido "nodes," and the system had already become encumbered. The software lacked grace—for instance, there were six nodes in St. Louis, but the San Francisco Fido was making separate long-distance calls to each of them. The transition from two nodes to 50 took only three months. By early 1985, there were 150 nodes.

The unexpected boom in Fido systems caused another problem—a lack of familiarity among FidoNet sysops. When there were ten or so nodes scattered across the country, it was simple for each sysop to know by name his fellow Fidos. But when 20 or 50 BBSes were scattered across the nation, a sysop couldn't know everybody else. As BBSes came and went, maintaining the list of active boards became a burden. Sometimes the Fido software would ring the number where a BBS once was—usually at 4 AM—only to awaken some poor soul who knew nothing of computers or modems.

The Fido team in St. Louis took over the Fido "nodelist" which they still maintain today. Tom Jennings was left to develop the software, and the St. Louis group would handle requests for new nodes and verify the continued existence of established ones. Today, there are over 23,500 nodes, and it is estimated this is growing by about 50 each week. The number of users is uncountable—each node can have from one to thousands of users.

A numbering scheme was developed to assist message transfer, or "routing." Today's FidoNet addresses are made of four parts: zones, nets, nodes and points.

Information about all FidoNet systems is kept in a single database, the "nodelist." It holds information about every node, including the BBS name, its phone number, who runs it, and the routing address. The nodelist, now nearly two megabytes long, is updated and distributed weekly.

Fido software has been transferred to work on various computers and operating systems, including IBM, Macintosh, Amiga, UNIX and others. Today's cornucopia of Fido-compatible software includes BinkleyTerm, FrontDoor, Dutchie, TrapDoor, Opus, Confmail, QMail, Chameleon and dozens of others. Each piece of software is simply a different tool for using FidoNet.

In the beginning, FidoNet was solely a way to transfer private messages, or "netmail." Later, it added the capability to move public messages in various topic groups, much like the Usenet. This capability, dubbed "echomail" is now the heart of FidoNet. Echos may be regional (covering one state or county, for instance) or have worldwide distribution through thousands of BBSes. There are conferences on every conceivable topic—cooking, computers, religion, sports, politics, sex, anything and everything. If there isn't a topic that suits, you, it's possible to start a new one. There are conferences in the language of particular regions, but the vast majority of FidoNet messages are in English.

The network also handles inter-BBS file transfers and file requests. It is possible to post a program—for instance, new public domain or shareware software—on your local BBS, and within a matter of days, it can traverse the world. The FidoNet software itself is distributed this way.

For more Fido information

The FidoNet is kept together by a strong sense of community among both its operators and users. There's even a weekly newsletter, FidoNews, that is distributed electronically throughout the network. Through it, sysops communicate with each other to plan FidoNet's future. The editors also run FidoNews BBS, in Ontario, Canada at 519-570-4176.

Finding a FidoNet BBS that's a local call may seem like a conundrum - if you don't know where one is, how can you find it? Try asking around at local bulletin boards that aren't part of Fido, or at a user group meeting. Chances are that someone in the know will point you in the right direction. Failing that, call up a non-fido BBS in your area and ask there. If you have access to electronic mail, ask David Deitch ("deitch@gisalt.fidonet.org") about Fidos near you. He volunteers to help with FidoNet questions.

If you need information about how to join FidoNet, ask Tim Pozar ("pozar@kumr.lns.com" or "Tim Pozar@1:125/555").

Questions about the FidoNet/Internet gateway can be sent to "hostmaster@fidonet.fidonet.org".

The editors of FidoNews can be reached at "editor@exlibris.tdkcs.waterloo.on.ca."

Finally, the network coordinator for zone one (North America) is George Peace, who can be reached at "george.peace@f13.n13.z1.fidonet.org".

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